

“This is our campus!” - Student perspectives of their 1st year experience at a new university campus

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This study examines students' first-year perspectives as undergraduates at Australia's newest satellite campus. Those early experiences appear influential in securing successful transition (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). This study sought to allow staff to better understand the inaugural cohort and strategically respond to their specific needs. The cohort sampled included several emerging demographic subgroups that researchers have recently requested be more fully investigated (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). This paper details the findings of focus group interviews with members of those subgroups, and follows an earlier online survey of all first-year students. Findings reveal students thematically conceptualising their experiences in terms of commitment to their studies, a desire to engage in dialogue, and an 'us versus them' competitiveness. Mature age learners detailed their significant sacrifices made when undertaking university studies and the possibility of this factor being a variable influencing persistence and attrition is raised.

Introduction

This study responds to the recent call for qualitative methodologies to be utilized alongside quantitative ones in order to gain a more detailed insight into the first year experiences of Australian undergraduates, and especially the experiences of a growing number of non-traditional sub-groups (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). This paper focuses on the second stage of a larger study exploring the perceptions of students enrolled in the first year of study at the new campus of the University of Southern Queensland. The first stage of the research was quantitative and based on the previous work by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005). This paper reports on the findings from focus group interviews which were used to investigate in depth students' perceptions of various aspects relating to their university experience (as emerging from the analysis of the quantitative survey).

The research findings presented here have the potential to add to literature on the first year experience, and enable the University of Southern Queensland's Springfield campus to accurately profile its inaugural student body and subsequently identify and respond to their broad first year needs, and the more specific needs of identifiable sub-groups.

Context for the research

Springfield campus opened in March 2006 and is Australia's newest tertiary satellite campus. It is located in the Western Suburbs of Brisbane, an area undergoing significant growth and change. Of the students enrolled, over half of respondents were the first in their family to attend university, almost half had parents who did not complete high school, almost a third were managing the care of small children with their study and a majority were engaged in between 10 - 24 hours of work per week. A large percentage (31.13%) were from a low SES background (as determined by their postcode), and 41.72% were from a middle SES.

Method

As part of a larger study, this paper reports on the analysis of focus group interviews. The project as a whole explored the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do students have of their first year experience at Springfield campus?
2. To what extent does background appear to influence student perceptions of their first year experience at Springfield Campus?
3. What attitudes towards learning do students in their first year have?
4. What impact does the first year experience have on student attitudes towards learning?
5. What recommendations are appropriate in terms of student learning and course development?

The focus groups were semi-structured – that is, while focus group questions were drafted in advance, participants were able to move the discussion in ways that were relevant to them. All students enrolled were offered the opportunity to participate in focus groups, and those that contacted the researchers self selected into one of the two focus group times. Students were offered an incentive of afternoon tea for participating.

In total, fourteen individuals participated in focus groups (see Tables One and Two), including 9 females and 5 males (i.e. 64% female; 36% male) with an average age of 32 (mean = 32.38; SD = 11.03; with one missing data point¹). Eight participants had children, while six did not (i.e. 57% with; 43% without); eight worked part-time (i.e. 57%), four did not work at all (29%), while only one in the group worked full-time and another didn't indicate current working arrangements. The majority of participants were enrolled in the Faculty of Education (i.e. 9 out of 14; 50% of focus group one; 88% of focus group two), while only two (2) participants in the first group were enrolled in the School of Psychology and a single student in both the first and the second groups (i.e. 2 participants in total) were enrolled in the Faculty of Business. Half of the participants in the first focus group (i.e. 3) had dropped a course during the current year, as had half from the second group.¹ The focus group demographics were similar to the overall sample in terms of work commitments and faculty breakdown, but the focus groups had a higher percentage of men present (36% compared to the overall sample's 19%); the mean age of focus group participants was 32 compared to a sample mean of almost 25 (mean = 24.92); and the percentage of focus group participants with children was 57% (compared to the sample percentage of 33%). The study therefore provides an insight into the perceptions of mature age learners, a group who are emerging in importance in studies concerning First Year Experience issues (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

On the whole, focus group participants were spontaneous, talkative and confident in answering questions and often required very little prompting. They were active in digressing to the major themes relating to topics such as the distinction between different levels of commitment to study and the need for dialogue between students and the university.

¹ One person did not provide this information.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of focus group one

<i>Name</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Dropped course this semester</i>	<i>Dropped course this year</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Hours/ Week</i>	<i>Children</i>
Mary	Education	32	Female	Yes	Yes	P-Time	14 - 15	Yes
Susan	Business	18	Female	No	No	P-Time	10 - 12	No
Margaret	Education	41	Female	Yes	Yes	P-Time	10	Yes
Luke	Psychology	41	Male	Yes	Yes	P-Time	20	Yes
Cathy	Education	22	Female	No	No	No	0	No
Carla	Psychology	19	Female	No	No	P-Time	12	No

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of focus group two

<i>First Name</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Dropped this semester</i>	<i>Dropped this year</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Hours/ Week</i>	<i>Children</i>
John	Education	20	Male	No	No	P-Time	25	No
Kim	Education	48	Female	Yes	Yes	No	0	Yes
Sophie	Education	21+	Female	No	No	No	0	Yes
Alan	Education	43	Male	No	No	P-Time	6	Yes
Jodie	Education	28	Female	No	Yes	P-Time	10	Yes
Anna	Education	45	Female	Yes	Yes	No	0	Yes
Richard	Education	24	Male	N/A	N/A	Fl-time	22	No
Peter	Business	40	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	25	No

Overall, focus groups provided strong themes which were largely presented from the perspective of a mature aged student. In both groups, younger students tended to actively identify with the mature aged students - a tendency not surprising given the negativity of several 'school-leaver' stereotypes discussed in the group. As a result, the perspectives of the 'school-leavers' were less obvious in discussions. What was achieved was a direct demonstration of the likely dynamics of these groups in a classroom setting in which it is conceivable that mature-aged students are equally vocal and confident, while younger students are more reticent to offer opinions or may not in fact receive the opportunity.

Content analysis was used to elicit themes from the focus group discussions. The procedures described by Cresswell (2005) and Burns (2000) were followed and all analyses related to manifest content (i.e. content directly said during interviews), rather than to implied content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001).

Themes emerging

Three main themes emerged from the focus groups. Overall, participants felt that their student cohort was divided in terms of *commitment to their studies*, and this impacted on their experience in the first year. They wanted to *engage in dialogue* with one another, their lecturers and the course content, and felt this would enhance their ability to achieve. The experience of being on a new campus of a larger institution had much to do with the category '*us versus them*' whereby students pitted themselves against others outside their campus, resulting in feelings both positive and negative. These three themes will each be explored below.

‘Commitment’

In the focus group sessions ‘commitment’ was expressed in terms of behaviours – attendance and participation in class, completion of reading assignments and preparation for tutorials, and contribution to group and project work. Initially it appeared that this theme reflected a divide between mature age students and school-leavers, and there was talk of a noticeable “divide with the mature age students to the school-leavers”, and a “very segregated” atmosphere in one student’s classes as a result of these two demographic groups. Indeed the youngest participant, and the only school-leaver present, remarked that “people... who’ve just come out of high school – don’t understand the bigger picture”. In addition, two of the younger participants raised the possibility that in class participation was perhaps being monopolized by the mature-age learners:

Will: (aged 20): Sometimes...the seminars...and discussion groups...tend to be dominated by mature-age learners as well and we don’t get to have a say.

Richard: (aged 24): I’ll be honest – the mature-age students...tend to take over from the young person’s perspective.

However, as the topic developed (it was mentioned 69 individual times during both focus groups), it became apparent that the divide was in fact based on differing levels of motivation and direction (or commitment). Mary best captured this insight when she reflected that “regardless of age, if you’re 22, if you’re 32, if you’re 52, if you’ve got the dedication there, that plays a big part in the classroom”. Focus group discussions suggest that students who are ‘committed’ embody four attitudes or understandings – they know why they are at university, they know the stakes of failing, they know where they want to be at the end, and they are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of their future career.

Call to dialogue

Throughout the focus groups it became apparent that students sought to be engaged in a high level of dialogue with the university, notably in terms of face-to-face interaction, course content, and assessment details. A possible reason for this is that students see themselves as a ‘client’ accessing services, rather than a ‘student’ being taught. In this regard participants sometimes mentioned money and indicated that they perceive themselves to be customers of the university.

On-campus experience: Dialogue with lecturers and other students

The Springfield campus provides an ‘on-campus experience’ which may impact on the students it recruits, and also may impact on the perceptions of these students. Luke reminded everyone that learners at USQ Springfield were “on-campus students”, and “rightfully expect” “real contact hours” and not “fake” ones such as intensive mode courses or online ones. Margaret added that “if you’re an on-campus student then you should have on-campus lectures”. To her statement that “I’d rather have face-to-face lectures. I’d rather have face-to-face tutorials”, there were observable nods of agreement and audible consensus.

Participants commented on approximately 25 occasions about teaching mode. Some noted that their lecturers seemed to be making a concerted effort to make lectures “more interactive” and engaging. There appeared to be a dislike of online teaching and a request for regular face-to-face lectures. This preference for an on-campus experience highlights the importance to students of having a meaningful dialogue with their lecturers and other

students. On the whole, there appeared to be a view that students had strong relationships with each other, support staff and their peers.

Assessment feedback

Students also expressed a need for their voice to be heard and acknowledged in terms of areas that needed improvement. One such area was that of the communication of assessment items and assignment expectations:

Mary: You kind of need to have a little bit more feedback and information a little earlier...because I need to be thinking about it (the assignment) a lot sooner...I think that's added stress, particularly for first years, who don't know how to manage their time. If they got it (assignment information) up front, it can help them manage their time".

Interestingly, in the first semester students worked excessively hard because they were not sure they had the ability to pass. There were heightened levels of self-doubt. It was the students' opinion that had feedback been provided earlier in the semester, they could have been better placed to gauge how much effort they needed to put in. Margaret described how feedback in terms of results from Semester One enabled her to make re-adjustments to her personal life in Semester Two:

Margaret: Last semester I did live university. Everything was university. It reflected in my marks. I got quite good marks...But then this semester I've balanced a bit better and I still am getting good marks, but my life is a life. It's not just university and just children or just washing. It's actually a life happening now".

Dialogue as a customer

The notion that students are consumers emerged spontaneously in both groups with approximately 17 individual mentions. Again, this theme did not arise in quantitative analyses. Education students reported their perception that advertisements/enrolment guides had promised several majors which were subsequently not-offered when the semester began.

Anna captured the mood of the students when she suggested "It's a little bit like false advertising". Interestingly, the discourse used by students in this theme of dialogue seems to suggest that students at Springfield view themselves as being a client or customer of the university. This is an issue to be noted because it raises the possibility of differences in institutional and student expectations, which may influence the way students engage with the university, and how they expect the university to engage with its students, both corporately and individually.

The 'Call to Dialogue' theme did not appear in the quantitative analyses but emerged as a strong and spontaneously raised theme in both focus groups. The theme appeared to have a number of aspects. For example, it appears that students expressed who they were wanting to dialogue with (i.e. lecturers, tutors, and their peers), and gave an indication of one important topic they wished to have a dialogue about (assessment issues), and clarified the role they wished to undertake during that dialogue (that of a client or customer). It may well be that the students are thereby indicating the means by which they wish to be integrated into not just the

social world of their university studies (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), but integrated into the academic world also (Rhodes and Nevill, 2004).

‘Us versus them’

A number of focus group participants had experienced student life on USQ’s main Toowoomba campus as well as at the Springfield satellite campus. This gave them a valuable insight into what made the First Year Experiences at Springfield different. Of interest was the fact that the competition for resources between Toowoomba and Springfield emerged as a significant theme in both focus groups (i.e. approximately 34 individual mentions). Both groups perceived competition with Toowoomba in terms of lecturers, the delivery of face-to-face versus online or extensive mode delivery, and the quality of delivered materials and student-lecturer interactions.

Overall students considered that Springfield compared favourably with Toowoomba in terms of the improved availability of appointments with staff at Springfield, small class sizes, and relationships with peers and lecturers.

Cathy: You can go and...get an appointment quite easily, which was different from Toowoomba”.

Peter: the class was really small...I’m comparing it to the class I went to in Toowoomba and that was...twice the size.

On the other hand, participants considered that Springfield compared unfavourably with Toowoomba in terms of a reduced face-to-face teaching time when compared with internal subjects taught in Toowoomba, lack of structure and clear organization, lack of ‘university style camaraderie’, insufficient exam guidance, and the unavailability of off-campus lecturers.

In the second focus group, one participant commented, and the whole group agreed, that they felt Toowoomba considered Springfield to be a ‘sub-university’, and that Springfield was provided with second-hand content from Toowoomba and insufficient exam guidance. They considered this to be unfair given that students on both campuses pay equivalent fees. Anna raised this issue when discussion focused on lecturers from Toowoomba coming to Springfield to deliver course sessions:

Luke: We’ve had only half the number of lectures that Toowoomba has had (for two subjects done in semi-intensive mode). I put on my feedback that I don’t like being treated that way, as a second class university...we rightfully expect that the university will provide us with the same type of contact hours as...Toowoomba gets...I terms of getting lecturers down here on a weekly basis to go through the same materials with us, face to face, as they do in Toowoomba”.

Anna: I understand [that we are sharing resources with Toowoomba] but we’re not a sub-unit...a sub-university ... We pay the same amount of money – you know, we’re doing the same thing.

Participants largely agreed that the perceived disparity had made them feel frustrated, had increased stress levels and had caused feelings of being a “second class campus”. Conversely the positive aspects of Springfield, such as a strong friendship and classmate networks, and good relationships with on-campus staff were the primary reason that most students gave for returning in 2007.

It is important to note that this topic emerged spontaneously in both focus groups and was not evident in quantitative results. The repetition of content, spontaneous comment and evidence from both groups, however, indicate a substantial theme to the first year students, and is of possible interest to any institution considering building a satellite campus.

Summary

The quantitative survey revealed that over 80% of our survey respondents claimed that they were enjoying their course, were satisfied with their university experience, and enjoyed being a university student. The numbers of students who liked the atmosphere at USQ Springfield was similarly high, with only a minority of students suggesting that university had not lived up to their expectations. It is interesting, in closing, to note how the students spoke of their campus:

Anna: This is our campus.

Richard: Oh yeah, this is ours.

Anna: This is ours.

Kim: Our university.

Having students express that they feel like they “own” the Springfield campus was unexpected. However, it may indicate that the first year experience of these students was essentially positive. Students indicated that they would be re-enrolling the following year because of their new friendships, their networks, and their relationships with staff. This sense of “ownership” of the campus was clearly a factor in their decision to return for their second year.

This research has highlighted the issues that concern 1st year students at a new campus, and the paper has presented the student perspectives from a range of demographic subgroups that have recently been targeted for further investigation (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). By examining these student perspectives in the Springfield USQ context, a clearer picture of specific preoccupations, priorities and expectations has emerged, and the student voice has been more clearly added to the findings of an earlier quantitative survey.

Three dominant themes emerged. The first concerned the manner in which student commitment was conceptualized as incorporating four attitudes or understandings. Students indicated they were purposefully aware why they were at university, what the cost of failure entailed, what their career ambitions were and how their studies were related to their future careers. Finally, they were clear about the sacrifices they were making in order to undertake tertiary studies. This theme can therefore add to recent findings concerning an increased purposefulness by university students, and highlight how commitment is being articulated and conceptualized by mature age learners (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). The issue of mature age students detailing the sacrifices they are making in undertaking tertiary studies has emerged as a new topic, and it is recommended that further research should investigate whether this issue connects with the concept of persistence, and is therefore a possible variable that should be incorporated into the current debate on attrition and retention (Krause, 2005).

The second theme concerned the students desire to engage, and be engaged, in terms of a dialogue. It was not possible to determine whether the students were speaking solely in terms

of USQ Springfield, or more generally as university students. It has been pointed out that universities and their specific contexts are uniquely different and it is not possible to generalize from individual university findings (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). Certainly the University of Southern Queensland's Springfield campus needs to respond to their students' perceived need to dialogue. As such this research project has underlined the wisdom and insights that can emerge once universities invite their students to clarify what is of importance to them as tertiary learners (McInnis, 2001). Other institutions should certainly consider incorporating this theme into any survey they do of their year one intake.

The final theme reflected a sense of 'us versus them' competitiveness that our new satellite campus students felt in comparison to learners at the university's central campus. This finding might only appear to be relevant to institutions planting new campuses, but it could be argued that cross-institution competitiveness may be prevalent to some degree at longstanding multi-campus institutions. Certainly the concerns raised by the Springfield learners in this study will require a strategic response because it was reported that some of their 'us versus them' concerns would influence decisions to continue their studies beyond the first year. The recommendation here is that by canvassing their year one cohorts, institutions are better able to develop their own situation specific models of factors contributing to institutional attrition, and to respond accordingly (Krause, 2005).

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